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ABSTRACT

This study explored two mothers' and two teachers' beliefs about who was responsible for children's teaching and learning. Participants were two teachers at Adams Elementary, a public school in middle-class suburban Boston (Massachusetts), and the mothers of two kindergartners there. The children were a boy and a girl, both firstborn and developing typically. Both teachers were female, born in the United States, and married. Teachers were interviewed individually in their classrooms in September. Mothers were interviewed in their homes in October. Findings included: (1) mothers thought of themselves as teaching in all domains of learning; (2) mothers and teachers disagreed about each other's responsibility for teaching and learning as teachers contended that in kindergarten formal learning becomes increasingly the work of the school, while mothers stressed their continuing role in teaching school-oriented skills; (3) as parents were more dependent on the school for access to information, they responded by becoming involved in the school and striving to learn about the teachers' methods; and (4) the organizational structure of schools may also hinder parent participation. Teachers may view it to be in their best interest to erect boundaries between themselves and families. For teachers the educational role of parents is to prepare children for formal academic learning and to support that learning. (Contains 54 references.) (JB)

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Responsibility for Children's Teaching and Learning: An Examination of Mothers' and Teachers' Beliefs

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This paper was presented as part of a symposium "Teachers, students, parents: Belief systems in educational settings," at the annual conference of the Northeastern Educational Research Association, Ellenville, New York, October 26, 1994.

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Responsibility for Children's Teaching and Learning: An Examination of Mothers' and Teachers' Beliefs

In many communities worldwide, the family is recognized as the institution entrusted with primary responsibility for enculturating, socializing, and educating children, passing on the beliefs, values, knowledge, and skills that will enable them to succeed in their community as well as ensure the community's continued existence (Benedict, 1938; Bornstein, 1991; LeVine, 1980; Valsiner, 1987; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). However, in the United States, social, political, and economic transitions in the wake of the Industrial Revolution have been associated with fundamental changes in family organization and socialization practices, including the roles of the family and school in children's teaching and learning (LeVine and White, 1987; Vinovskis, 1987). Whereas children previously learned by everyday participation in family life, schools today assume increasing responsibility for children's education. Parents' unavailability due to the movement of their workplaces outside the home, plus the rapidly changing, highly technical and specialized nature of the knowledge and skills that children need to acquire, have contributed to this shifting of the family's traditional educational role to settings such as schools where children, guided by specialists, can develop the competencies needed for success in their mature roles. Increasingly, parents are viewed as responsible for preparing children *towards* participation in school and complementing the school's primary responsibility (Dencik, 1989; LeVine, 1980; Rogoff, Mistry, Goncu, & Mosier, 1993).

In the last three decades a large literature in education and sociology has been generated that describes responsibilities of schools and families. Three prevalent themes can be identified in the discourse on teaching and learning. First, the education

community widely acknowledges parents to be children's first and most influential teachers (Berger, 1983; Boger, Richter, & Paolucci, 1986). Second, in spite of the trend towards an expanded role for the school, society still *holds* parents accountable for their children's socialization (Goodnow, 1985). Third, what parents believe is important for their children has been linked empirically to their actions that shape children's environments and socialization experiences (McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1982; Miller, 1988; Sigel, 1986), as well as to children's performance in school. The primary basis for interest in the idea that parents are teachers comes from research claims concerning the importance of early experiences and family variables in predicting school achievement (for reviews see Epstein, 1987; Henderson, 1987; Scott-Jones, 1984, and Weston, 1989).

The wisdom of involving parents meaningfully in their children's education is axiomatic in U.S. educational discourse at the close of the 20th century (Epstein, 1987). Recent school reform proposals endorse the role of parents as teachers and call for partnerships between families and schools in order to enhance student achievement (e.g., National Governor's Association, 1991; U.S. Department of Education, 1987).

The prescriptive literature of the schools tends to view parents and teachers as sharing responsibility for most aspects of children's learning (Griffore and Bubolz, 1986). Some evidence suggests that, over the past three decades, an expansion has occurred in the traditional outlook on parent accountability beyond elementary socialization to include a role in developing children's cognitive skills (Smith & Griffith, 1990; Lareau, 1989; Wrigley, 1989). Professionals now advise parents -- primarily mothers -- of the importance of providing a stimulating home environment that fosters cognitive development and expect them to participate in and support their children's schools. At the same time, parents are criticized for pressuring or "hothousing" children by introducing early academic experiences (Elkind, 1981, 1987; Rescorla, Hyson, & Hirsh-Pasek, 1991).

The shifting of educational responsibilities has sometimes led to tension between parents who seek to participate in children's education and school personnel who want to professionalize teaching and reduce lay control (Boger, et al., 1986; Lightfoot, 1978; Vinovskis, 1987; Waller, 1932). Professional educators have tended to focus on the salutary or negative consequences of parenting practices as a way to explain children's outcomes. While calling for involvement in their children's education, parents are criticized for being over- or underinvolved and blamed for children's academic and social problems (Lareau, 1987; Van Galen, 1987). Moreover, much of the recent research on educational processes within families presents a narrow view of the role of parent as teacher. That role is often described as socialization, while education is the school's responsibility (Parsons, 1961). A dichotomy is frequently made between formal learning in school and informal learning at home (Levin, 1992).

The important role played by family and school variables in children's school performance has been well documented. Yet adult beliefs about responsibility for children's teaching and learning have been largely neglected as a research area, except for a few investigations in non-U.S. communities (e.g., Russell, 1991; Tizard, Mortimer, & Burchell, 1981; Whiting and Edwards, 1988). Little is known about the way parents and teachers actually view their mutual responsibility for children's teaching and learning. The research described in this paper aims to add to the existing work by examining the beliefs of U.S. middle-class mothers and teachers of kindergartners with respect to their responsibility for children's teaching and learning, and how, in their minds, these responsibilities are divided, shared, coordinated, and carried out. This work is part of a larger investigation of the educational beliefs and practices of mothers and teachers of kindergartners. Using interview material collected for this broader study, I examine how

mothers and teachers view their teaching roles and the relation between those ideas and the educational strategies that they see themselves employing.

Mothers and teachers of kindergartners have been chosen for study because kindergarten entry represents a status change for children and initiates a formal relationship of shared responsibility for parents and schools. Some evidence suggests that parents regard kindergarten as a major transition when formal instruction begins and work habits should be stressed (Stipek, Milburn, Clements, & Daniels., 1992). The decision to involve only mothers in the present study rather than mothers and fathers is based upon evidence that in U.S. families, even when both parents are employed, responsibility for socialization tends to fall primarily on mothers (Smith & Griffith, 1990; Lareau, 1989; Leslie, Anderson, & Branson, 1991; Wrigley, 1989).

The present study is guided by a sociocultural perspective that views home and school as contexts in which children, under adult guidance, learn the mature roles of their communities (Eisenhart & Graue, 1990; Rogoff, 1990; Valsiner, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978). Educational practices are assumed to be related to the prevailing beliefs, values, and goals for children in a particular community as well as to community features (Morelli, Rogoff, Oppenheim, & Goldsmith, 1992). Beliefs and practices regarding children's education have a public nature: They are constructed socially and can only be understood in the context in which they occur (Lightfoot & Valsiner, 1992).

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were two teachers and two mothers of kindergartners who attend Adams Elementary [1], a public school in their middle-class suburban community south of Boston. The children, a boy and a girl, were kindergarten students in the teachers' classrooms, firstborn, and developing typically. The mothers were U.S.-born, residing in

the community where their children attend school, and living with the fathers of their children. Both mothers reported annual family incomes, before deductions, in the range of $70,000 to $79,000.

At the time of the interview Mrs. Harris was 42 years old, married 16 years, and had a 3-year-old daughter in addition to Beth, the kindergartner. She had a bachelor's degree and was employed approximately 20 hours a week for a book publisher. Her work place was in the home during the hours when her children were either asleep or in school. Her religious preference was Protestant. Mr. Harris was 42, held an MBA degree, and worked in Boston.

Mrs. Conlon was 32 when I interviewed her, married for 9 years, and the mother of three. Her religious preference was Catholic. Besides Ben her kindergartner, she had two daughters, aged 3 and 1. Engaged fulltime in family work, she had worked as an engineer until Ben's birth. She intended to return to the labor force when her children were in school fulltime. Mr. Conlon was 33 years old and working as a police detective in Boston. He had completed some graduate work in criminal justice.

Both teachers are female, U.S.-born, residing in the community where their schools are located, and married. They taught an average of 20 students in each morning and afternoon kindergarten session. At the time of the interview Mrs. Anderson was 44 years old and had taught for 23 years at Adams; 18 years were spent in kindergarten. She had two children, ages 7 and 9, who attended the school where she taught. Mrs. Woods was 47 years old and had been a teacher of kindergartners for 7 years at Adams and preschoolers for another 6 years. Her three children were young adults living away from the family home. Both teachers held master's degrees in Early Childhood Education. Their religious preference was Protestant.

The school system from which the participants are drawn is located south of Boston in a suburban community of approximately 20,000. The 1990 per capita income for this community was approximately 150% of the state per capita income, and less than 3% of the residents lived below the poverty line. The population is mostly white (99%) and U.S.-born (95%). Most residents (82%) commute out of town to jobs that are professional-managerial (48%) or technical-sales-clerical (37%). Bachelor's degree is the modal category for educational attainment. The teachers and mothers who took part in this study described the town as largely middle class. The annual expenditure for education is above the state average and the town is perceived regionally as providing high quality education. Adams is a modern, well-equipped K-6 school with an enrollment of more than 700. Though the town is relatively homogeneous, Adams is located in an area of town that is described as socioeconomically "diverse" by the teachers. As reported by teachers and parents, Adams prides itself in the high level of family involvement in the school. Support for this claim may be found in the elaborate wooden playground built in the schoolyard by parents as well as the many other projects provided through an active parent organization.

Interview data analyzed for this paper for the two teachers are drawn from those of a group of kindergarten teachers who took part in the broader study. The teachers accepted my mailed invitation to participate in a study examining the ideas of teachers and mothers of kindergartners about their mutual roles in children's education. Out of the total population of kindergarten teachers in the school system where Mrs. Anderson and Mrs. Woods work, 88% responded affirmatively. The mothers were selected from the classrooms of participating teachers by asking teachers to assign a list of random numbers drawn by me to the students in their classrooms who met the criteria for inclusion in the study. These criteria are that children be firstborn, living with both parents in the

community where they attend kindergarten, and developing typically. Mothers received a letter from me describing the study and inviting them to take part. The basis for the selection of data for these mothers and teachers was the fact that the mothers' children were students in the teachers' classrooms.

Procedures

Teachers were interviewed individually in their classrooms during September. Interviews with mothers took place in their homes in October after they had gained some familiarity with the kindergarten experience for their children. I completed all of the interviews which were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis. They ranged in length from 90 to 120 minutes each.

The research strategy involved the use of personal interviews with open-ended questions to gather information from mothers and teachers on topics related to their beliefs about responsibility for teaching children. Information was also gathered on the family backgrounds of participants. Though the interviews for mothers and teachers were parallel, questions were tailored for each group. Questions were arranged topically, but judgment was used in deciding on both sequence and wording of questions.

The interview guide comprised two segments. Questions in the first part explored the topic of the role of parents and classroom teachers in children's education. The second segment of the interview contained questions examining what mothers and teachers think they do in order to carry out their perceived responsibilities in children's education. The purpose of these questions is to understand both how mothers and teachers organize children's experiences at home and school and the meanings adults give to these practices.

Analyses involved classifying the data into major analytic categories through coding and then searching for patterns and themes. Ideas that formed the basis of certain questions were represented by a priori codes. For example, frequently occurring activities

were used to code descriptions of the content of learning at home and school. Inductive codes were developed from open-ended interview material on the roles of parents and teachers. The data were examined for the purpose of identifying differences and similarities between and among mothers' and teachers' meaning systems regarding children's teaching and learning. Table 1 lists the topics around which the interviews were organized, coding categories, and illustrative statements that were made by mothers and teachers.

Results

In this section I first report on how mothers and teachers see themselves arranging for children's teaching and learning at home and school. This comparison of the content and process of learning in the two settings is followed by an examination of mothers' and teachers' reflections on issues related to the roles of family and school in children's education.

Arrangements for Teaching and Learning

At School. The teachers arranged their 2 1/2-hour morning and afternoon kindergarten sessions into sequences of whole- and small-group learning activities. The children arrive in spacious, colorful classrooms that display their own work and are filled with literacy artifacts, blocks, manipulatives, sand/water tables, and computers. Initially, they gather with the teacher on a carpet for opening activities consisting of a flag salute, attendance, calendar and weather work, sharing experiences or items that children bring in, and then songs, poems, and perhaps a story. A teacher-directed lesson follows in which the whole group may work on an activity designed to develop academic skills. These activities are likely to integrate several curriculum areas (e.g., language arts, math, and creative expression) and organized around the special theme (e.g., teddy bears) the class is working on at the time. Several times a week the children write in journals on

topics that they or the teacher select. Sometime during the session they work at the large number of centers located throughout the room. Under teacher guidance they decide where they want to work and hang their names at that center. On some days teachers direct their choice to special learning activities that are part of a theme or the "Letter of the Week." At times that vary from day to day, snack, recess, and activities taught by specialists (e.g., music and gym) are plugged into the schedule. After closing activities that include sharing and a story, the children leave for home or after-school care. Teachers commented that the period is too short for all they want to cover and wished for full-day sessions.

Though teachers must meet the objectives of a prescribed curriculum, they have flexibility to go beyond it. Mrs. Anderson described the curriculum as being

> . . . like a large umbrella. There's so much that you can tuck in under that umbrella that comes from the children. While covering all the concepts in the curriculum you take in the interests of the children. Therefore you are making learning exciting and their own. They're invested in it.

Both teachers stressed that in kindergarten they teach pre-reading and pre-math rather than reading and math. Pre-reading involves immersion in literacy and activities such as big books, songs, poems, alphabet, letter-sound relationships, and journal writing. Math concepts like classification, estimating, patterning, and relationships are taught through calendar activities and manipulatives.

The content and process of teaching in these two classrooms reflect the teachers' belief that children's learning comes out of doing. For Mrs. Woods, children learn not by sitting and listening, but by "activity, exploring, talking, asking questions all the time . . . by being involved." Both teachers described education broadly, including values, attitudes, and self-esteem, as well as the cognitive domain. In fact, the focus of their teaching is more on process (e.g., the writing process) than on basic skills. They felt that many parents disagree with this emphasis. According to Mrs. Woods,

> The new stuff about teaching process is what we're trying to change in education . . That's why the Hooked on Phonics thing drives me nuts. Cause that's just teaching skills, not the process. I know where that's coming from because the way reading is being taught now is literature based and parents are scared that kids are missing phonics. But that's not true. They're getting as much phonics as before but in different ways.

The idea that children learn through play and having fun was prominent in the teachers' discourse on children's learning, though they admitted that kindergartners have less opportunity for unstructured play than they did in preschool. Part of the hidden curriculum in these kindergartens is teaching children that learning in school is sometimes hard work:

> I hope that primarily children will think that learning is fun. But then I try to tell them early on that sometimes they won't like what they have to do. You get some children who are very disappointed when they get to kindergarten because they think it's going to be like preschool and primarily play. We have to say, "Sometimes we have our worktime and sometimes you'll have to do something you'd rather not do . . . And, you know, that's kinda like life." (laughs)

Much of the content of kindergarten teaching and learning is formatted as play. The math program, for instance, uses manipulatives and games to develop basic math concepts. The notion that children learn through play is another that teachers thought parents did not share. The teachers commented on feeling pressured to provide more didactic teaching by parents who feared that their children were merely playing and not learning anything in kindergarten.

At Home. Mothers reported that a typical day for their children consisted of kindergarten, routine self-care activities, meals, unstructured play with siblings and peers, TV, and evenings spent with parents before stories and early bedtimes. The children were involved in a few organized activities after school. Beth's weekly drawing lessons allow her to pursue an interest her mother reported she has had "from the beginning." Ben tried cooking lessons but soon dropped out, preferring unstructured play. That kindergarten dominated mothers' and children's schedules was apparent. Mothers arranged their

family- and paid-work around the children's comings and goings. When I asked what their children did in kindergarten they described the broad overall scheme that they had observed first hand while volunteering in the classroom. Their children provided scant information about what went on there:

> I don't find anything out from Ben. (laughs) He talks about who said what in school today. What they watch on TV, who he played with, a magician came in today. You know how it is with kids -- You have to drag it out of them.

When I asked what they taught their children both mothers offered that it was quite similar to what the school was doing. Reading with mothers as well as fathers was an everyday occurrence. Before the start of kindergarten the mothers had engaged their children in informal discussions about letters and sounds. Mrs Harris, for instance, began by pointing out letters in her child's name, telling her, "That's a B." Looking through animal books (Beth's favorites), Beth learned all the A animals and the sound that A makes. Mrs. Conlon had taken Ben outside and helped him find "every letter of the alphabet." She taught him his ABCs and to write his name "just by sitting down with him." Both mothers stressed that they were preparing their children to read, but that teachers in school should actually teach reading. Mrs. Harris's rationale for this decision was her desire for Beth to connect that excitement with school.

Number concepts were taught in similar informal ways. Mrs. Harris, for example, used Beth's interest in a litter of puppies to teach addition and subtraction:

> When the puppies were born it was the first time I ever did word problems with her. She was fascinated with them and everyday would count them to make sure there were five. I'd say, "If Bill and Charly got out of the box, how many puppies would be left?" And she rattled these off like crazy. She loved these problems. Then I tried doing that with just numerals on paper -- uhuh. She couldn't hold that concept unless she had something in her experience.

Mrs. Conlon's narrative of math learning in the kitchen shows her pleasure in Ben's interest:

> I tell him, "Here's a cup and here's a half cup of sugar. Are they the same?" Then

> I show him that two half cups are the same as a cup. We mix sugar and water and it dissolves. We freeze ice cubes to figure out if -- Oh, it's awful having a mother who's a scientist, you know! (laughs) He loves it and I do too.

She replicated teaching strategies that she had observed Ben's teacher using while working as a volunteer in his classroom. For instance, from a learning supply store she purchased materials designed to enhance prewriting skills, an area in which she thought Ben was having some difficulty in school. One purpose of her involvement in the school was finding out "what they're looking for."

Like the teachers, mothers spoke of learning as being "more than just memorizing things." It involves understanding processes and how to take material and learn from it. Mothers stressed that learning takes place everywhere -- at home as well as in school -- every minute of the day. Agreeing again with their children's teachers, they viewed learning as occurring in the context of play and "just having fun."

School Is Not Home and Home Is Not School. In the minds of these mothers and teachers, how do teaching and learning differ at home and at school? Mothers and teachers agreed that, in general, the content of learning in the two settings is similar. However, there are differences in the process or the <u>how</u> of teaching and learning at home and school. First, while agreeing that children learn by playing and having fun, they identified important differences in the play that occurs at home and school. Mrs. Harris observed that, at home, she can engage Beth in ways that may not be possible for her kindergarten teacher:

> A good show holds her interest. So that's the way we usually present things here -- in an offbeat, funny sort of way. I don't know if you can necessarily do that in a class of a lot of kids cause it might get crazy.

This ability to be spontaneous and playful while teaching their children led the mothers to suggest that teaching and learning at home is more interesting than what teachers do in school. Moreover, for mothers, what the teachers referred to as play in school was

actually highly structured (e.g., math learning with manipulatives). They felt that in kindergarten their children missed the free play that was so integral to their preschool experiences. Mrs. Anderson pointed out what she saw as a different about learning at home and school:

> By virtue of working with a group of 20-odd children at school just makes it different. And although parents are teachers, I certainly don't think that children think of them that way. They look at teachers and school as different . . . They should think that overall learning is fun, but sometimes it isn't -- it's just plain hard work.

The nature of the relationship that mothers and teachers have with children accounts for a second difference between teaching and learning at home and school. Mothers may know the developmental levels and interests of their children better than teachers and be able to tailor what they teach to that information. Mrs. Anderson explained, "I know where Beth is at and I also know her interests so we run with that." Alternatively, Mrs. Anderson suggested that the close personal relationship between parent and child may make teaching one's own child difficult. Mrs. Woods concurred, stating that, as a teacher and parent, she didn't understand how anyone is able to homeschool. Ben's mother observed that he listened to his teacher more because the atmosphere at school was completely focused children learning together.

A third difference lies in opportunities afforded in the home setting for integrating learning into the experiences of everyday life. For instance, Mrs. Conlon teaches math through daily activities such as cooking. Beth's mother described how her teaching is different from a teacher's:

> I can take you into the kitchen and and pull out a bowl and draw a circle and make you aware that the top of this bowl is a circle. Let's look at all of the other circles we have around here. I don't know that a teacher with 20 children can do that as easily.

Mothers' and Teachers' Reflections on Responsibility for Teaching and Learning

Teachers' Responsibility. As teachers, Mrs. Woods and Mrs. Anderson viewed their role as one of facilitating children's learning. They are responsible for providing a school environment that promotes learning and includes opportunities for active, hands-on learning experiences that are tailored to meet the diverse interests and needs of students. This atmosphere should be perceived by children as primarily fun and play. The teachers did not think that their specialized training in child development, curriculum, and pedagogy qualified them as "experts." Rather, it gave them skills so that, "if we're stumped, we know how to seek out resources." Both teachers stressed that, because the education field was changing so rapidly, it was imperative for teachers to stay on top of new developments (e.g., Whole Language and critical thinking). They often mentioned that most parents didn't understand how children really learn and were wedded to outdated ideas that they remembered from their own childhoods.

Teachers expressed the idea that teachers were responsible for the formal curriculum of school. Mrs. Woods described how her training and experience prepared her for this role:

> There are academic things that I've learned over the years that are important. The secrets of teaching things that a parent may not know -- the importance of prereading and motor skills, why it's so important to have sewing cards and throw large balls, the developmental progress of a young child and what are the norms of certain things.

Teachers differentiated formal learning from learning that takes place at home. In their discussions they referred to formal learning as academic in nature and having to do with the prescribed curricula of school. Mothers also observed that teachers' possession of teaching "techniques" and formal curriculum were unique features of their roles. In addition, they referred to the teachers' role in teaching children to work in groups. This seemed, for mothers, to distinguish the classroom teacher's role from their own role in teaching a child one-on-one. According to Mrs. Harris:

> She has a curriculum that she deals with and I don't -- at least not technically. So it's her role to do her best to see that certain elements of that curriculum are passed on to Beth. Because she is dealing with a large group she also has the job of introducing them to the social life within school, what that means, class rules. That's her job. I can give Beth pointers, but the teacher's really on the job doing that.

In the minds of mothers and teachers, being in possession of formal kindergarten curriculum demarcated a special role for teachers.

When asked whether there are some things that schools should not teach mothers and teachers only mentioned religious values and political opinions. They agreed that teaching about universal values and morality was partly the responsibility of schools. Mrs. Anderson argued that it is impossible to run a classroom without touching on these issues.

Parents' Responsibility. One of the main themes that emerged from the discussions with mothers was their view that parents and teachers share responsiblity for children's formal as well as nonformal learning. In narratives of teaching and learning in mothers' homes that were described above, it is evident that they engaged in what teachers termed academic or "formal" teaching (i.e., school-oriented skills such as teaching the alphabet, letter-sound relationships, number concepts) and employing methods that were strikingly similar to those used by teachers. Moreover, mothers were actively seeking out information about what and how children learn in school in order to teach their children at home. Teachers stressed that, because parents lack a formal curriculum, their role is primarily in areas of nonacademic or "nonformal" learning such as attitudes, values, morality, life skills, self-esteem, getting along with others, self-control, love of learning. The teachers believed, however, that formal academic skills are only part of what children need to learn. Because parents spend considerably more time with children than teachers do and know their children better, teachers reasoned that parents are children's most important teachers. They stressed parents' teaching role as observational models for their

children: "If parents put a high value on learning and school and its importance in life, then children develop that attitude." Mrs. Anderson described it as "a longterm, just living it sort of thing. It's teaching by example, really. And it's the very subtle messages that kids pick up on." Parents teach, for instance, through their reading- and TV-viewing habits and by the kind of support they demonstrate for teachers when children are within earshot.

Besides teaching children directly, mothers were seen by both groups as being responsible for making proximal and more distal arrangements of the environment in order to support learning at school. Teachers mentioned that parents should set up an atmosphere in the home that supports the school's efforts (e.g., speaking positively about teachers, bringing in a sign of fall), but does not create negative pressure for children. Mrs. Conlon described how these two roles -- teaching and providing an environment that supports school learning -- were integrated in her life:

> We set up an atmosphere for him to learn -- limiting his time for TV, reading to him, providing opportunities for him to play. I think I am totally responsible for his learning. And my husband too. The whole family.

Clearly, play is a major component of the support environment that mothers and teachers believe is important. It figured prominently in teachers' descriptions of parents' role:

> Letting them play . . . and grow and run and not keeping them inside too much. Playing <u>with</u> your child rather than sending them off to play. I know that's so hard for all of us. You need to treasure that time to play with them.

> I always tell parents the best thing they can do with them is read, sing, poems, games, play with them. That's more of what they should be doing -- fun activities. They can engage their children in learning through a great sense of fun.

Providing experiences that enrich and extend children's school learning is another aspect of the environment that mothers and teachers think is important. Mrs. Anderson focused on the limitations of school time and resources that make this a necessity:

> There are just too many things I can't teach in school, that I can't get to. I think of the child in my class who is interested in the body and knows the names of all the body parts and the bones. I can give him maybe one or two projects a year but I can't take him to places where he can explore that and learn. The parents' role is to continue that interest, to physically take him to museums, library -- enrichment.

Teachers objected strenuously, however, to parents' involving their young children in organized activities such as athletics and academics. They reported that choices of these kinds of activities put pressure on children to grow up too soon. This theme ran throughout teachers' responses and was echoed in the voices of the mothers who limited children's participation in structured activities ("I think, with kindergarten, one thing at a time."), but arranged family trips to museums and library.

Mothers also mentioned that part of the parental role is providing settings in which others provide instruction. Both shared that their families' decisions to move from urban centers to their costly suburb were based largely on a belief that their children could receive a high quality of education there. For Mr. and Mrs. Conlon the decision not to send Ben to a parochial school was difficult:

> My husband and I had a big decision because we both went to Catholic schools. We decided on public schools because the resources weren't there in the parochial schools anymore -- computers, books, top-quality teachers. We did a lot of thinking about this because, you know, we like the discipline of parochial schools and we felt there was more teaching of respect for others and honesty and about God . . . But we figure we can teach them the things we know are important. So it's a trade-off.

In order to provide an environment in which specialists could provide instruction that parents believed children needed to succeed in their mature roles, the Conlons and Harrises experienced long commutes and work hours for fathers. Because fathers' time at home was limited, mothers in both families assumed primary responsibility for children's education.

When asked if they thought that a parent's role as teacher changes when a child goes to school, all of the participants responded "No" or "Hopefully not." Although

rejecting the suggestion, mothers and teachers also indicated that, as children grow, parents' influence will wane over children's school learning and that of teachers will increase. Mrs. Anderson portrayed the parents' role as becoming

> increasingly less important in formal learning. Their role always continues in other kinds of learning, like the emotional side. The formal learning definitely becomes the role of the school. As the child gets older the gap widens.

Nonetheless, teachers were critical of an attitude they identified among parents that, once their children were in kindergarten, education became the school's responsibility.

Role of Parent Involvement in Children's Schooling. In my discussions with teachers about the role of parents as teachers, that topic tended to be merged with the issue of parent involvement in a child's school. They portrayed home and school as connected in the common enterprise of educating the child, as well as a notion that, with school entry, parents can best fulfill their responsibility for children's teaching and learning <u>through</u> the school. When a child begins kindergarten, a new dimension is added to the role of parents: while they are urged to continue teaching as before, now they also need to be involved in various ways in the child's school. Thus, teachers and parents begin to include the teaching role of parents under the umbrella of parent involvement. For parents, along with this new role comes a new relationship with their child's teacher: Teachers become responsible for educating parents as well as children.

When asked to describe an ideal home-school relationship teachers and mothers used the words "partnership" and "collaboration." They also mentioned the features of parent involvement programs that are prescribed for successful schools in the educational literature. First, both groups advocated that parents and teachers communicate frequently through channels such as notes, phone calls, newsletters, calendars, conferences. Mrs. Harris portrayed the ideal relationship as one in which there was a lot of communication

back and forth. She noted her disappointment that communication with Beth's teacher is limited:

> She doesn't call home and I don't call her. No one has ever said, "Here's my number, call me . . . Or write me a note. You can do whichever way is comfortable." I've shared notes back and forth. We have a conference coming up. Open house was last spring for the whole system. After general introduction to w hat kindergarten is we broke up into rooms and met with our principal and teachers. They explained their philosophy, buses, snacks, everything.

Mothers wanted a school that was open and "provided parents with a lot of opportunities to go into the school."

The teachers reported using a number of channels for communicating with parents and spoke of the importance of building "bridges" between school and home. Parents who wanted to contact teachers could write a note or phone during the day and teachers would contact them. Neither teacher liked parents calling them at home because they valued their privacy. They sent home regular newsletters and calendars which parents could use to keep informed about events at school. Mrs. Anderson used several strategies to link home and school. For instance, books made by the children went home for parents to read with children. Children were asked to bring things from home (e.g., teddy bears) that were tied to the theme the class was working on. Such activities were designed to both educate parents and ease children's transition to kindergarten.

The teachers admitted that, unlike in preschool, they actually had very little day-to-day contact with parents. The school did not permit parents to make unscheduled visits to their children's classrooms. Instead, the school secretary acted as gatekeeper, screening entry. Because children were encouraged to ride school buses, casual encounters between parents and teachers before and after school were rare.

A second way in which teachers wanted parents to be involved in their child's education was through volunteering in the school. Both of the teachers spoke proudly of the extensive volunteer opportunities they provided. Parents were able to sign up to work

two days a month on projects such as cooking and art, computers, or reading and writing with children. Those who were unable to commit to a regular schedule could volunteer to help with a one-time project or speak with the students about their jobs. Mrs. Anderson and Mrs. Woods were quite pleased that in the prior year they had classroom volunteers (primarily mothers) approximately 75% of the time.. Both mothers got babysitters for their younger children and spent two days a month in their children's classrooms.

Cooperating with and supporting teachers and the school is a third type of parent involvment advocated by teachers. They hoped that parents would keep their appointments, talk positively about the school experience with children and provide them with everything they need. Mrs. Anderson liked parents to be "open-minded so that if something goes wrong they'll call and be willing to listen to the whole scenario before jumping to conclusions."

A fourth avenue for parent involvement was to show interest or concern in the child. "Parents ought to look at what their child brings home and talk about it so the child knows it's important, but not put pressure on them." Teachers wanted parents to be supportive of a child rather than hovering. Mrs. Woods stressed the importance of balancing that support with allowing a child to take on responsibility for themselves.

Barriers to Parent's Role as Teacher. Durimg the interviews mothers and teachers referred frequently to what they believed interfered with the role parents should play in children's teaching and learning. Two rather obvious obstacles are parents' paid-work and family responsibilities. Teachers, parents themselves, spoke sympathetically about the difficulties parents face in juggling their work roles and emphasized that parents don't need to be highly involved in the classroom in order to fulfill their role as teacher. The work roles of the two mothers were carefully arranged around their parenting responsibilities. Mrs. Harris did not think her job interfered with her role as Beth's

teacher. Rather she reported that she felt fortunate to have the resources to work at home around her child's school hours. Mrs. Conlon, on the other hand, responded laughingly that "everyday living -- this one" (referring to her infant) got in the way of what she'd like to teach Ben.

The mothers referred to the lack of knowledge and information about curriculum, teaching methods and everyday happenings at school as interfering with their role as teachers. They contrasted this situation with that of preschool when they brought their children everyday and could speak informally with teachers and see for themselves what a child was doing. They spoke of their children's reticence in discussing school and of their reliance on volunteering in the classroom, newsletters, and calendars to fill in the gaps. They relied on an informal network of parents to stay informed. Mrs. Harris, for example, spoke longingly of the need for information:

> At the first conference I'm going to ask, "What is it you do in kindergarten?" I mean unless you've been through it you don't know that. You're not prepared for invented spelling, any of these things . . . It might be useful to know who your teacher is. Every other professional who enters our lives we do a little looking into. Teachers are with our kids everyday and we don't know anything about them except hearsay. Why in the beginning of the school year can't you have an open house -- this is how we're going to teach this year. This is what we're going to cover. A lot of parents are hungry for that kind of information.

A theme that coursed through the discussions was that teachers as well as mothers regarded parents as lacking knowledge and expertise about the educational model in use in kindergarten. The teachers spoke with pride about their kindergarten program which focused upon the developmental needs of the whole child. They contrasted what and how their students were learning with parents' kindergarten experience that was skills-based and involved sitting, listening, and memorizing. Parents were seen as having unrealistic expectations for children and pressuring teachers to use skills-based practices such as phonics. In contrast, mothers recognized their own knowledge limits and stressed the need for more opportunities to learn about what the teachers were doing.

Parents' own discomfort with school may act as another barrier to their role as teacher. Mrs. Harris mentioned that parents often feel "intimidated by school, teachers, the whole process." The school is responsible for communicating to parents that "we're here for you, to serve your child, and we want your input."

Structural features of schools may also serve to reduce parent participation. The issue of security was featured prominently in teachers' discussions of parent access to the school. Mrs. Anderson explained that parents' movements were restricted due to concerns about security. Parents could no longer come to their child's classroom and the entrance to the kindergartens from the outside was kept locked:

> We have to be very careful now about who is in the building because of unfortunate instances that have happened elsewhere. It's also very disruptive when a parent drops in because it takes me away from the children. I've had parents say that a child forgot a library book and brought it down. That's fine as long as the child is A-OK. It's better if they just leave those things at the office. We have over 700 children in the school, you know.

Limiting access to the classroom may further serve to relieve the pressure that Mrs. Anderson claimed teachers experience from parents who object to their teaching practices. Mrs. Woods stressed, however, that the point of the policy was not to keep to parents out, but to protect the precious children whom their parents have entrusted to the school.

Rationale for Parent Involvement. Why do mothers and teachers think that parent involvement in children's schooling is important? First, teachers stressed the role that parents play in making important programs possible in the school. In the absence of instructional aides, parents act as essential resources for computer classes and "messy" projects.

A consistent theme in the discussions with mothers and teachers was that having parents present in the school also served to educate parents about what it is that the teachers are trying to accomplish. From the teachers' perspective, being in the classroom affords parents a chance to see for themselves that their children are really learning. Mrs.

Anderson hoped that by educating parents about the importance of hands-on, developmental learning, parents would be less critical and the pressure would be off. The need for parent education was mentioned frequently by both teachers. As described earlier in this section, parents were viewed as not understanding how children learn. Mrs. Woods saw value in a slide presentation introducing the kindergarten program to parents:

> It shows parents the terrific things that go on in kindergarten. That learning comes out of doing. Then we can say, "When so-and-so was in blocks this is what happened. And they realize that learning takes place. We have to sort of show them the way.

Suspecting that some parents teach reading at home, Mrs. Anderson was hopeful that by observing her reading to children and asking them questions parents would learn some techniques to use at home. She explained to parents the fun things they could do as well as the importance of some of things they were already doing.

Mothers mentioned repeatedly their desire to learn about what, how, and why teachers teach. Mrs. Conlon wished she could go into the classroom more to observe Ben's teacher because

> It's all so new to me. When I went into Ben's school I couldn't believe how loose it was, how the kids could move around, pretty much pick what they wanted to do. When I went to school you just sat at a desk. Class size was much larger.

Mrs. Harris's attitude toward involvement is similar. Her strategy was to

> . . . keep as close to the school as possible. I volunteer in the classroom so that I'm in there. I make sure that I'm in touch with her teacher, try to find out about their ideas, what's happening, why they're doing that, what they expect, what the outcome of this will be.

Both mothers reported that what they had learned was helpful to them in teaching their children at home.

Mothers and teachers concurred that it matters greatly for children whether their parents are more or less involved. Mrs. Anderson believed that the school experience is enhanced for those children whose parents take advantage of all of the opportunities for

participation. For Mrs. Woods, when a child's parents are highly involved in their education, the child feels that home and school are connected. "The child gains a sense of his own worth, that his parents love him, and that what he's doing has value." The mothers adopted a pragmatic approach: if a parent shows concern and interest, a special dimension is added to a child and teachers will be more likely to give that child attention. Mrs. Harris expressed this attitude with folk wisdom: "The squeaky wheel gets the grease."

A shift in mothers' and teachers' constructions of the meaning of parent involvement is identifiable from their reflections on the teaching role of parents of kindergartners. Respondents viewed parents as responsible for educating themselves about the educational model that the school is using, a model that is unfamiliar to them. Clearly, an effort to educate parents is the meaning behind parent involvement for these mothers and teachers.

Discussion

Mothers thought of themselves as teaching in all of the domains of learning, including cognitive. Similar observations have been made in work in other communities (e.g., Goodnow, Cashmore, Cotton & Knight, 1984; Levin, 1992; Tizard, Mortimer, & Burchell, 1981). As Tizard and her colleagues found in English preschools, teachers were unaware that parents were actively teaching school-related skills. In contrast to earlier positions that parents socialize but don't teach (e.g., Parsons, 1961), these middle-class mothers and teachers endorsed wholeheartedly the idea that parents are children's most important teachers. They contended further that there is nothing that parents should not teach and some things, like values, attitudes, and self-esteem, that parents teach best.

Mothers and teachers disagreed, however, with respect to one another's responsibility for that teaching and learning. Whereas teachers contended that, after the

start of kindergarten, formal learning increasingly becomes the work of the school, mothers stressed their continuing role in teaching school-oriented skills. The finding that parents perceive, with school entry, their influence over children waning and the influence of people outside the family like teachers waxing, is consistent with reports of English parents to Newson and Newson (1976) and Australian parents to Knight (1981).

Changing cultural beliefs concerning the potential for children's early development may contribute to parents' perception that they are responsible for children's teaching and learning. Dramatic increases have occurred in recent years in the importance attached to young children's cognitive development and schooling (Wrigley, 1989). Besides their traditional responsibilities, parents are now held accountable for overseeing developing cognitive, social, and emotional skills (Dye & Smith, 1986). Parents are advised of the critical importance of early childhood for the development of cognitive skills and preparation for a vast, lengthy formal educational system. Meanwhile teachers, perceiving themselves as professionals with specialized knowledge, stress parents' responsibility for children's social and emotional development, rather than a major role in cognitive development (Goodnow, 1985; Tizard et al., 1981).

Teachers distinguished formal (i.e., academic or school-oriented) from nonformal (i.e., all other) aspects of learning and considered formal learning to be the school's province once a child starts kindergarten. Mothers, in contrast, saw themselves as sharing responsibility with teachers for both types of learning. Interestingly, teachers stressed that learning in noncognitive domains (e.g., social, emotional, motivational) was critical for success in school and life. The possession by teachers of a formal curriculum was often mentioned as an official marker of their role in teaching formal skills. Mothers took advantage of opportunities to learn as much as they could about these special techniques of teachers. Levin (1992) observed that a dichotomy is frequently made between formal

learning in school and informal learning in the family. This assumes that what children learn at home is informally structured and embedded, while school learning is formally organized and decontextualized. As Levin found in her study of children's learning in low-income ethnic Hawaiian families, the teaching done by middle-class mothers in the present investigation included an understanding of school practices as well as an intention to teach school-oriented skills.

While the content of what mothers and teachers were teaching was similar, the process they used differed in several respects. First, though mothers and teachers agreed that children learn through play at both home and school, they described learning at school as more structured than at home. In their view, parents teach and learning should always be fun, whereas the school teaches and learning is sometimes fun but sometimes hard work. This connection between learning and fun is similar to what J. Valsiner (personal communication, November 1992) described: for parents, having fun coordinates their two roles of parent and teacher. The emphasis on the fusion of learning and fun is consistent with the claim that there exists in the U.S. a cultural value for linking fun with children's learning (Lightfoot & Valsiner, 1992; Wolfenstein, 1955).

Whereas teaching and learning at home, compared to that at school, tended to be more fun, spontaneous, natural, and integrated into everyday life, what occurred in school was more formal and structured. Teachers' specialized training, the kindergarten curriculum they had to cover, time limitations and the large group of students they were responsible for teaching constrained and directed how and what they taught.

In many respects, the learning environments arranged by teachers in their kindergarten classrooms conformed with the guidelines of the National Association for the Education of Young Children for developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp, 1988). That is, the kindergarten program emphasized broad areas of a child's development

as well as learning through active exploration and interaction with people and real materials. Teachers perceived this educational model as progressive and incompatible with the learning paradigm embraced by parents. Teachers maintained that how parents teach has consequences for children's success in school and life. Parental teaching should be fun, informal, and integrated in the activities of everyday life. Teaching that is didactic or that pressures children for early learning of school-oriented skills is developmentally inappropriate, counterproductive, and potentially harmful. They were critical of parents who pressured teachers for formal academic instruction in kindergarten. They agreed with many early childhood educators who argue that the tendency of some middle-class U.S. parents to "hothouse" or push young children to do academic work is harmful (Bredekamp, 1988; Hyson et al., 1991; Stipek et al., 1992). Bernstein (1977) argued that family-school conflict is likely if early childhood educators advocate a developmental curriculum and parents understand the meaning of the school's function as teaching basic skills. Mothers and teachers in the present study, by contrast, were eager to coordinate their efforts in order to fulfill what each group viewed as its own responsibility in children's education.

Uncomfortable with their perceived lack of knowledge about the methods in use in their children's kindergartens, mothers actively sought out opportunities to learn about what and how teachers taught. At the same time they talked about their frustration with barriers -- both personal and school-related -- that limited their ability to access information. The snapshots they provided of a typical day in a child's life did not portray high pressure environments, but ones consistent with those advocated by many in the early childhood community .

Besides having a direct role in children's formal and nonformal learning, mothers and teachers believed that parents were responsible for supporting children's school

learning by making proximal and more distal arrangements of the environment. This included providing an atmosphere that was supportive of the school's efforts. Whiting (1980) described how parents' control over children's learning and development rests not only in how they directly teach children, but also in their more distal arrangements of children's learning. Parents act as gatekeepers, organizing and managing children's experiences with the world outside the family, including the school (Goodnow and Collins, 1990). While children develop and learn in a number of contexts, parents are responsible for assigning children to these settings.

The relation between beliefs about parent responsibility and parent involvement in their children's schools was noted by Russell (1991) in his work with Australian families. Parents who defined education broadly (i.e., not in merely academic terms) saw a major educational role for parents and equal partnership with teachers. Those who defined education narrowly (i.e., what goes on in schools) perceived education as the job of teachers. Mothers and teachers in the present study regarded education as encompassing learning in a variety of domains and placed high value on parent participation . The range of opportunities available for parents to be involved in their kindergartners schooling included all of the categories outlined by Epstein (1987) in her model. Mothers took advantage of the many opportunities teachers offered and wished for more. The high rate of parent involvement in their children's schooling was gratifying for teachers. Mothers' and teachers' construction of the meaning of parent participation went beyond providing important programs in the school, although this was very important to teachers. By demonstrating interest in their child's education mothers believed that they were gaining leverage with a child's teacher. Children, teachers believed, derived great benefit from seeing that their parents valued and supported the school.

The parent involvement program in these kindergartens also functioned to educate parents about what and why teachers taught. Participants frequently talked about the need for parent education. Teachers were concerned that parents, not understanding the nature of children's learning, might do harm by either pushing children to learn material that was inappropriate for them developmentally, or by using unsound teaching methods (e.g., direct teaching of phonics). Additionally, by educating parents about current practice, they hoped they would eliminate parent dissatisfaction with the kindergarten program and, hence, parent pressure on them to change. Mothers, for their part, expected to be able to use the knowledge about the formal curriculum and pedagogy of the school at home to teach their children. Formal parent education in these kindergartens occurred through volunteering in the classroom, attending informational meetings (e.g., workshops on the math program or the spring kindergarten open house), and reading materials that came home from the school (e.g., class newsletters and calendars).

One of most interesting themes that emerged from discussions with these mothers and teachers is that, in their descriptions of the teaching role of parents, they tended to merge that idea with parent involvement in a child's schooling. In their minds, in a shift begins when a child enters kindergarten, the parents' role as teacher is subsumed under involvement in a child's schooling. Now dependent on the school for access to the information they need, parents in a sense teach <u>through</u> the school. Because parents sometimes teach the wrong thing or the wrong way, it becomes the school's responsibility to manage what parents actually teach through opportunities for parents to learn from the experts -- teachers. The early childhood educator is thus responsible now for teaching parents as well as their children.

While acknowledging the importance of parent education through participation in school activities, it was also evident that a number of factors may facilitate or constrain

that involvement. The barriers to parent involvement that mothers and teachers talked about have been described by a number of authors. Participants in the present study frequently mentioned competing responsibilities of paid- or family-work roles. In addition, parents' ease with teachers and schools is related to variables such as social class, ethnicity, and a parent's own experience as a student (Lareau, 1989). Even though the mothers in this study were knowledgeable about the language, customs, and values of schools, they sometimes felt intimidated. Teachers' fears that parents may question their professional competence or their low sense of efficacy may militate against viewing parents as having a role in children's education (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1985; Power, 1985). Van Galen (1987) argued that efforts to enhance parent-teacher collaboration are frequently confounded by teachers' interest in keeping parents at a distance in order to maintain their control and autonomy as professionals.

The organizational structure of schools may also hinder parent participation. Teachers may view it in their best interest to erect boundaries between themselves and families. Corwin and Wagenaar (1976) argued that organizational controls in schools serve to maintain boundaries and limit the influence of parents, thereby insulating schools from outside control. Freedom from parent influence also enhances teachers' efforts to improve their status as a profession (Powell & Stremmel, 1987). It is interesting that, while the teachers at Adams provided parents with many opportunities for participation, the perceived need for controlling access to the school for security reasons effectively acted as a barrier to parents. Moreover, the view expressed by the teachers that "this is my classroom afterall" serves to establish territoriality and keep parents at a distance.

It was apparent that these mothers and teachers placed high value on their mutual roles in children's education and thought of one another as partners in this endeavor. For teachers, the educational role of parents is to prepare children for the formal academic

learning that occurs in school and, after school begins, to support that learning (Dencik, 1989; LeVine, 1980; Rogoff et al., 1993). This redefinition of parents' role in teaching and learning includes responsibility for parents to inform themselves about how and what children need to learn as well responsibility for teachers to provide parents with opportunities for this education.

Notes

[1] All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

[2] Teachers criticized as midguided and potentially dangerous the use of commercial skills-based reading programs that were being marketed for use by parents.

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